

## Corporate employees lose 'spare tires'



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### **Tire Kingdom partners with local gym for employee weight-loss contest**

By Sarah Stover

Staff writer

JUNO BEACH - Tire Kingdom actually wants its employees to lose their "spare tires."

That is, the ones around their waists.

The largest independent tire and automotive services retailer in the country is headquartered in Juno Beach, and its human resources manager, Robert Handel, decided to initiate a wellness program there. However, the program struggled to get started, so the three-year member of Loggerhead Fitness, a gym located across the plaza from the office, asked its owner Rick Opton, for help.

With the help of aerobics coordinator Suzie Flournoy, Tire Kingdom chose to go with a weight loss contest modeled after NBC's hit reality TV show, "The Biggest Loser."

Ms. Flournoy and two of Loggerhead's personal trainers reviewed requests from interested employees to select 24 participants. They were divided into three teams of eight for a 12-week weight-loss contest, said Mr. Opton.

The contest started Feb. 18.

Just as on the show, the teams are visible by their designated colors of red, black and blue. They also have to work out as a group with a trainer at least twice a week, said Ms. Flournoy, adding that they are supposed to get together at least one more time during the week for another group work-out.

During the contest, the gym is offering eight-week trial memberships to all of Tire Kingdom's employees, said Mr. Opton.

"(The contest) has gotten everybody motivated," said Mr. Handel, adding that the office has also changed some of its practices into healthier ones as a result.

For example, bagels and pastries were the norm every Friday, but now bagels and fruit are served. The company also replaced some of the soda in its vending machines with juices and water, and formed a team at Weight Watchers to participate in the recent walk for the American Heart Association, he said.

Tire Kingdom's corporate staff decided to start the fitness initiative after two active employees died from health issues last year, said Mr. Handel.

The deaths of their co-workers and the announcement of the contest got employees, such as Daniel Kelton, a credit analyst, and Angela Hollands, who works in payroll, thinking about their health. They are currently the biggest losers out of the group. Mr. Kelton has gone from 240 to 209 pounds and Ms. Hollands has gone from 228 to 208 pounds in nine weeks.

Mr. Kelton wanted to participate because he needed to lose weight, wants to be around for his two children and was getting to the age where he was concerned about his health, the 38-year-old father of a 4- and 7 -year-old said.

He recently went to the doctor and was told he technically fell under the classification of obese.

"That was disturbing," he said.

His family has gotten in on the lifestyle change, as his wife joined a gym and they now plan the week's menu, including their children's snacks and desserts, he said.

Ms. Hollands is a bride-to-be with dreams of walking down the aisle looking svelte. Her upcoming June wedding was the main reason she wanted to get involved in the contest, she said.

Although her fiancé has been supportive, he has always been healthy and active, she said, adding that he prepares a lot of her meals.

The employees also get support from their teammates.

"This was a really great idea that Loggerhead and Tire Kingdom had, because, like I told Rick, if he had just offered us memberships, we would've probably shown up twice then stopped," said Mr. Kelton. "(Being on a team) has really helped us achieve our goals."

Ms. Hollands believes her team will keep working out together after the contest ends.

"It's been kind of cool because you may have kind of known each other, but we definitely do now. We've made eight new friends that maybe we didn't have before. We really push each other and reward each other," she said.

The participants are supposed to keep food logs as well as meet for work-outs. Being on teams has helped them stay on track since they don't want to disappoint their fellow team members, said Mr. Kelton.

"One of the things I stressed to them was it was going to be about 80 percent diet and 20 percent working out," said Mr. Opton.

However, he and the three trainers also set weight-loss goals for each week at an achievable rate of 1 to 2 pounds, said Ms. Flournoy.

"Between the 24 of them, they have lost 308 pounds in eight weeks," said Mr. Opton.

While they set manageable goals, the participants have goals of their own.

Mr. Kelton hopes to be down to 200 pounds at final weigh-in, he said.

"I just thought, if I can do a little more than 2 pounds a week, I can lose 40 pounds in 12 weeks, and I'd be really happy with that."

Ms. Hollands plans to be under 200 by the contest's end.

"I don't care if it's 199.9," she said, laughing.

However, it's definitely not over for her when the contest ends, as she has set a goal of reaching 180 pounds by her wedding day.

One way she'll achieve that is by continuing to not drink soda, which was one of the hardest items to give up, she said, adding that she used to drink a minimum of one Coca-Cola a day.

Participants were not given strict diets, but standard nutritional information. They attended two sessions given by nutritionists during the contest, which were also open to all Tire Kingdom employees, as well as getting help from their trainers.

"We let them know that making one change can make a big difference," said Ms. Flournoy.

Another big change for participants, especially Ms. Hollands and Mr. Kelton, was working out.

"(Before hand) I only walked from my house to my car," chuckled Ms. Hollands, a Port St. Lucie resident who now gets up around 4:30 a.m. to make it to the gym before work.

Exercising was also the biggest challenge for Mr. Kelton, who said he hadn't seen the inside of a gym in almost four years.

The employees will be rewarded for all their hard work in a few more weeks after the final weigh-in.

The top prize is a three-day, two-night stay at the Westin Our Lucaya Resort in the Bahamas and airfare, in addition to a \$250 gift certificate. Other prizes include \$4,500 in cash and gift certificates to places, such as Whole Foods, said Mr. Opton.

The team with the highest weight loss total will earn a prize, and the three participants with the greatest weight loss will earn a bonus. As for now, the one with the biggest weight loss each week gets to park in the "Most Tread Lost" parking space at the headquarters, said Mr. Handel.

While the contestants look forward to the prizes, some had their own rewards in mind.

Mr. Kelton told everyone it would be dinner at Crazy Buffet in West Palm Beach, but now he will probably just get a pizza with all the toppings, he said.

Mr. Handel hopes to continue the contest on an annual basis, as well as continue with other health initiatives. Research has shown that businesses that offer employees a wellness program, the end result is less sick days, a decrease in insurance costs and a happier staff.

While he has noticed the employees are more energized, it will be a while before he can figure out if the program has resulted in bigger benefits to the company, he said.